

Paper#: K164

HABERMAS, THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION AND ACCOUNTANT-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS: STEERING FOR SUSTAINABILITY?

Laura J. Spence

Centre for Research into Sustainability
School of Management
Royal Holloway, University of London

Gloria Agyemang

Centre for Research into Sustainability
School of Management
Royal Holloway, University of London

Leonardo Rinaldi

Centre for Research into Sustainability
School of Management
Royal Holloway, University of London
Leonardo.Rinaldi@rhul.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Based on Habermas' notion of 'steering', this paper analyses how the advisory role of accounting practitioners in small and medium accounting practices have developed and influenced their activity to advise small and medium sized clients (SMEs) on environmental sustainability issues. Accountants are consistently described as the 'most trusted advisors' for SMEs and enabling this advice could have substantial implications to improve sustainability because SMEs are notoriously difficult to reach and influence and yet make significant contributions national economies. The analysis uncovers transactional and relational tensions between three key constituencies: accounting practitioners as providers of environmental sustainability services; clients as users of the services; and the accounting profession that supports the development and provision of environmental sustainability services. Balancing these types of tensions implies the promotion of a variety of combinations between strategic and communicative actions. Practitioners' actions are built on personal trust that in turn is conditional to the establishment of institutional trust within the systems especially in terms of the accountancy profession. In this context, the research shows that accounting practitioners do not want to risk this personal trust and require the accountancy profession to develop institutional trust in the area of environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Small and medium sized enterprises, Habermas, steering, accountants, sustainability advice.

Acknowledgement: We are grateful to the ACCA for funding the research on which this paper is based.